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3 **The Qualitative Case Research in International Entrepreneurship:**  
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5 **A State of the Art and Analysis**  
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8

9 **Abstract**  
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11 *Purpose*  
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14 This paper examines how qualitative case research (QCR) has been conducted in the field of  
15 international entrepreneurship (IE) in terms of onto-epistemology and methodology. QCR can  
16 serve as an umbrella approach for contextualizing and capturing the complexity of IE  
17 opportunities, events, conditions and relationships, and to illuminate and enrich the  
18 understanding of related IE processes.  
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26 *Design/methodology/approach*  
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29 A thorough literature review was conducted of IE journal articles published between 1989 and  
30 mid-2017. This paper identified and analyzed 292 journal articles in terms of theoretical  
31 purpose and research design.  
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36

37 *Findings*  
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40 The findings suggest that the “positivistic” QCR is the customary convention of QCR in IE.  
41 “Exploratory” and “theory building” are the two most commonly pursued objectives. There  
42 have also been atypical practices and increased methodological rigor in recent years.  
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44 Alternative paradigmatic QCRs that depart from positivistic assumptions are in an early stage  
45 of development in IE.  
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52 *Originality/Value*  
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55 To the best of the authors’ knowledge, this is the first research examining QCR  
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3 onto-epistemology and methodology approaches in IE, providing a useful state of the art that  
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5 has been hitherto lacking in the literature. Based on this paper's findings, the authors suggest  
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7 that the IE field would benefit from greater methodological transparency in the reporting and  
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9 writing of QCR. Also, the breadth of knowledge and legitimacy of the IE area would be  
10  
11 enhanced through more studies involving unconventional (beyond positivistic) QCR.  
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15  
16 **Keywords.** International entrepreneurship, Qualitative case research, State of the art,  
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18 Onto-epistemology, Methodology  
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22 **Paper type:** Literature review  
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## 26 **Introduction**

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29 The interlinked globalized market, declining political barriers, and the advancement of  
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31 information and communication technologies have generated numerous product-market  
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33 opportunities for entrepreneurs and their firms in the cross-border context. Given this  
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35 dynamic environment, in the last two decades there has been a dramatic increase in attention  
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37 being given to the emerging and diverse field of IE (De Clercq *et al.*, 2012; Mort and  
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39 Weerawardena, 2006). IE concentrates on phenomena that cut across the disciplines of  
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41 marketing, international business, entrepreneurship and management, and engages a  
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43 community of diverse stakeholders, viz. academics, managers, consultants and policy-makers.  
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47 Alongside other disciplines, international marketing research has advanced enquiries in  
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49 the IE field in relation to foreign market entry pace, internationalization intensity and  
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51 diversity, international market selection and entry mode, among others (e.g. Aspelund *et al.*,  
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53 2007; Jørgensen, 2014; Knight, 2000; O'Cass and Weerawardena, 2009). The multi-faceted  
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55 nature of IE is a mixed blessing as it can also generate conceptual and methodological  
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3 fragmentation in the field (Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2007). Indeed, IE has been frequently  
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5 understood and written in terms of theories that discuss the substantive domain of the IE  
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7 phenomenon. There have been several IE literature reviews published during the last 15 years  
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9 (e.g. Angelsberger *et al.*, 2017; Coviello and Jones, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2011; Keupp and  
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11 Gassmann, 2009; Mainela *et al.*, 2014; Melén Hånell *et al.*, 2013; Peiris *et al.*, 2012; Rialp *et*  
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13 *al.*, 2015; Schwens *et al.*, 2018; Terjesen *et al.*, 2016) in which this study surprisingly found  
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15 only one effort to systematically summarize and assess prior IE methodological issues in  
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17 either marketing or other disciplines. This was the Coviello and Jones (2004) contribution that,  
18  
19 nonetheless, has become relatively dated.  
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22 Therefore, a current shift toward a methodological discussion in the field of IE is needed,  
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24 not only to complete the picture of what has happened in the field, but also to develop a  
25  
26 commonly understood vocabulary, a rigorous methodological toolkit (Coviello and Jones,  
27  
28 2004, p. 497-498), and, most importantly, a collective system of knowledge production  
29  
30 (Suddaby, 2014). In addition, such a review and analysis facilitate the identification of  
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32 methodological novel practices that enhance diversity and breadth in approaches to theorizing  
33  
34 a new field (Welch *et al.*, 2011, p. 757). Therefore, in order for the IE field to further expand,  
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36 one must take stock of and reflect on its methodological approaches and advances. The  
37  
38 examination and evaluation of methodological issues in IE is the focus of enquiry in this  
39  
40 study.  
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43 This review is especially interested in *qualitative case research (QCR)* and how it has  
44  
45 been conducted to advance knowledge in the field of IE. This paper discusses the ways that  
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47 QCR has been used (i.e. research practice) in relation to methodological writings and draws  
48  
49 from Platt (1996) and Piekkari *et al.*, (2009) who consider and problematize QCR as  
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51 disciplinary convention, namely a collective and socially-embedded product of a scientific  
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53 community that emerges from the formation of consensus among scientists within a  
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discipline.

This paper concentrates on QCR because it is “an increasingly popular and relevant research strategy” (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 30) and a qualitative methodology of choice for IE scholars. Despite its popularity, QCR has not been discussed in IE especially when compared with other established disciplines such as marketing (Piekkari *et al.*, 2010) or international business (Welch *et al.*, 2011; Piekkari *et al.*, 2009), possibly because of the potency of quantitative approaches in IE (see Styles and Seymour, 2006). QCR could enjoy its advantage of the flexibility and holistic and processual account into the international entrepreneurial behavior of firms (Coviello *et al.*, 2011; Reuber *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, QCR can identify and unveil the actors, behaviors and dynamics behind the opportunity theme, namely, its identification, enactment and exploitation, which appear to be high on the agenda of IE academics and practitioners (Angelsberger *et al.*, 2017; Mainela *et al.*, 2014; Terjesen *et al.*, 2016). In order to keep pace with this growing demand for enhancing the QCR, it is important to provide an understanding of the state of the art and illuminate the usefulness, versatility and paradigmatic pluralism of this methodological approach.

The current literature review identified and analyzed methodological practices of 292 IE QCR articles employing content analysis that considers the text content, context and arguments of authors. This approach has been used substantially in prior IE review studies (e.g. Coviello and Jones, 2004; Keupp and Gassmann, 2009; Mainela *et al.*, 2014; Peiris *et al.*, 2012; Schwens *et al.*, 2018). The current paper addresses the question of *how QCRs have been conducted in the field of IE*. To explore the question, the authors draw on Bluhm *et al.* (2011), Piekkari *et al.* (2010) and Welch *et al.* (2011), and investigate key aspects of the QCR methodology, including the theoretical purpose of qualitative IE case study, the research design of the case, and associated paradigmatic quality criteria.

Other than being a useful review that has not existed until now, this study contributes to

the IE literature by identifying the disciplinary convention in QCR in the form of “qualitative positivism” inspired by the legacies of Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2014). The current paper suggests that the development of IE can benefit from not only greater consistency of QCRs that embrace the positivist stance but also open-mindedness to alternative philosophical stances (viz. interpretivism or critical realism) that emerged from its findings.

This paper is structured as follows. Initially, it begins with an investigation of the onto-epistemological approaches of QCR, and, next, it discusses the methodology of reviewing and analyzing published IE case studies. The practices found in the sample of 292 IE case studies are then described and examined, employing relevant methodology literature. The authors conclude by arguing in favor of paradigm consistency and pluralism of QCR in IE.

### **Qualitative Case Research Under Different Theoretical Traditions**

The term “case study” defies a generally accepted definition stemming from the fact that cases are tied to different disciplinary perspectives and theoretical traditions (Patton, 2015). Despite differences in viewpoints, scholars consider cases to be meaningful units or set of units that investigate a phenomenon in its context using a variety of sources of evidence with the purpose of confronting theory with reality (Piekkari *et al.*, 2009).

Researchers make various implicit or explicit assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology) and the construction of knowledge (epistemology) (Tsoukas and Chia, 2011), resulting in a variety of definitions and approaches of QCR. This paper outlines how philosophical underpinnings are reflected in key aspects of QCR including theoretical purpose, research design and quality criteria.

*“Positivist” approaches to case research: the legacy of Eisenhardt and Yin*

Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2014) adhere to “qualitative positivistic”<sup>1</sup> assumptions about the nature of reality and the production of knowledge through QCR. Their onto-epistemological assumptions lean toward an objective reality that can be understood and explained by establishing regularities rather than the reasons behind them. The positivist view is the most common in empirical studies of marketing and management research (e.g. Piekkari *et al.*, 2010).

In particular, Eisenhardt’s work unpacks the usefulness of “theory building” QCR for inducing new theory from empirical data and generating theoretical propositions upon which large-scale quantitative testing can be based. Generalization differentiates Eisenhardt’s approach from other qualitative traditions that avoid context-free accounts and universal claims in favor of thick descriptions (Eisenhardt, 1989). The assumption that research mirrors objective reality is also embedded in the work of Yin (2014), who similarly endorses “exploratory” and “descriptive” QCR for emerging or new research areas but also “explanatory” QCR for deductively testing propositions and revising/extending existing theories. Both Eisenhardt and Yin detail a step-by-step process of designing QCR that starts with a priori specifications of concepts or constructs and includes the sampling decisions, units of analysis, data collection and analysis techniques for developing credible evidence. The power of QCR in this school of thought lies on replication logic and the search for general patterns (pattern matching) and descriptive constructs rather than idiosyncratic insights gained from particular settings. Data collection relies on the combination of interviews with archival sources or observation echoing Yin’s (2014) advice of triangulating multiple sources of evidence in order to develop a converging line of inquiry and unite with a single explanation of investigated phenomena. Data are analyzed according to the conceptual

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<sup>1</sup> The term “qualitative positivism” is discussed by Prasad and Prasad (2002, p.6) and refers to the “use of non-quantitative methods within traditional positivistic assumptions about the nature of social or organizational reality and the production of knowledge.” The term “positivist” in this article is used to denote “qualitative positivism” as per Prasad and Prasad (2002).

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2 underpinnings of the study and employing content analysis, thematic analysis or pattern  
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4 matching techniques. Rigor in QCR is ensured by deploying criteria inspired by the positivist  
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6 tradition, namely construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability, but  
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8 following different procedures to meet them (Welch and Piekkari, 2017).  
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### 11 12 13 *Alternative approaches to QCR: beyond Eisenhardt and Yin* 14

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16 Recently, marketing, entrepreneurship and international business literatures have  
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18 witnessed a remarkable onto-epistemological discussion regarding how core research puzzles  
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20 and methodologies are formed under post-positivist philosophical traditions, including  
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22 interpretivist/constructivist approaches and (critical) realism (see e.g. Ramoglou and Tsang,  
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24 2016, Suddaby *et al.*, 2015, Welch *et al.*, 2011).  
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27 Differing from the positivist tradition, *interpretivism* suggests that “only the physical  
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29 reality is ‘real’ and knowledge of that reality, which entails the actions of others, is subjective,  
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31 [and] derived from two sources: empirical experience and imagination” (Packard, 2017, p.  
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33 540). Knowledge is believed to be constructed rather than discovered, and value-free  
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35 empirical accounts are neither sought nor desirable. Viewed in this light, the focus of QCR is  
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37 neither theory building nor testing, but rather the utilization of the interpretive power to  
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39 develop an understanding of personal experiences and interpretations of the social meanings  
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41 attached by participants in their settings. In comparison to de-contextualizing and  
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43 generalization, QCR appreciates the uniqueness, complexity, embeddedness and interaction  
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45 with contexts.  
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49 As far as the research design is concerned, cases are selected not only for their revelatory  
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51 potential but also for information richness and accessibility that would allow deep scrutiny of  
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53 investigated phenomena. Interpretivists highlight the emergent nature of case research and the  
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55 dynamic or micro-level view of the unit of analysis (e.g. individual) that changes during the  
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3 course of the study. An emphasis of the “voice” of different participants and the reflexive  
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5 approach enables researchers to develop an in-depth understanding and interpret the social  
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7 meaning of investigated phenomena (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017).  
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9 Data collection and analysis are highly disciplined processes “whose central artifact, a  
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11 hierarchical ‘data structure’ is presented as a key output of the research, usually in the form of  
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13 a horizontal tree-shaped figure” (Langley and Abdallah, 2011, p. 215) (e.g., Corley and Gioia,  
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15 2004, p. 184). Instead of the terms of validity and reliability, the quality of QCR is assessed in  
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17 terms of “trustworthiness” of the data related to the involvement of multiple researchers in the  
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19 research process, member-checking and combination of emic and etic perspectives in data  
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21 analysis and reporting.  
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24 Another emerging approach to QCR is associated with *critical realism* that contends to the  
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26 existence of an underlying independent reality that can be understood only through our  
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28 descriptions and interpretations (Tsang and Kwan, 1999). This philosophical stance adheres to  
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30 a hybrid, stratified ontology claiming that the investigation of social phenomena is both causal  
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32 (matching a positivist view) and interpretive (matching a constructivist/interpretive view). In  
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34 light of critical realism, causality does not mean merely a search for event regularities because  
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36 scholars “need to go beyond the events to understand the nature of objects, and cause-effect  
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38 relationships do not consistently produce regularities in an open system” (Welch *et al.*, 2011,  
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40 p. 17).  
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44 As far as research design is concerned, selection of cases is “constructed” and driven by  
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46 sets of ideas (or theories) about the social world, the institutions and the social contexts acting  
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48 as external powers, and the researchers’ presumptions and propositions that make up the acts  
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50 of explanation and interpretation (Emmel, 2013). Explanatory accounts encompass actors’  
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52 intentionality and therefore in-depth interviews form the key data source in critical realist  
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54 cases. According to Pawson (1996), interviews and other sources of evidence are used both to  
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3 appreciate the interpretations of the experts (informants) and analyze the dynamics of social  
4 contexts, constraints and resources within which those informants act. The hybrid ontology of  
5 critical realism is reflected in the quality criteria of QCR, which draw both from positivism  
6 and interpretivism (Wynn and Williams, 2012). Triangulation is used to support causal  
7 analysis based on a variety of data sources and types, analytical methods, investigators, and  
8 theories (Modell, 2009).  
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## 18 **Methodology**

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20 The methodology in this paper included the assessment of international peer-reviewed  
21 journals as they are considered to be a validated source of knowledge (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2005).  
22 The current review identified 292 IE QCR papers following a thorough search for IE case  
23 studies between 1989 and mid-2017 (30 June 2017). The time scope of this analysis  
24 commenced with the landmark study of McDougall (1989), which empirically differentiates  
25 between international and domestic new ventures. The present study adopted a three-phase  
26 methodology: initially the authors exhaustively collected published IE empirical studies, then  
27 identified the studies employing QCR methods, and finally undertook a qualitative content  
28 analysis classifying QCR papers based on their theoretical purpose and research design. All  
29 articles were double-coded, checked on their consistency, and differences arisen were  
30 resolved through discussion.  
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44 Specifically, in the first phase of this review, IE empirical studies that involved primary  
45 data collection and analysis through four sources were identified. IE was defined as the  
46 entrepreneurial behavior or opportunity recognition activity for value creation across national  
47 borders. This definition captures the essential aspects of the conceptualization of McDougall  
48 and Oviatt (2000), and Oviatt and McDougall (2005). Initially, this review undertook a  
49 thorough and manual search for IE empirical studies between 1989 and 2013 in the published  
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article pool listed in five recent key IE literature reviews (Coviello and Jones, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2011; Keupp and Gassmann, 2009; Mainela *et al.*, 2014; Peiris *et al.*, 2012).<sup>2</sup> To avoid the possibility of missing studies between 2010 and mid-2017, the authors further employed the Boolean search that consists of key words presented in Jones *et al.* (2011) in searching databases such as *EBSCO*, *Proquest*, and *ScienceDirect*. These key words cover international entrepreneurial behavior, international comparisons of entrepreneurial behaviors and opportunity discoveries across borders. In order to be fully comprehensive, a further item by item manual search was conducted for IE empirical studies between 2010 and mid-2017 in outlets in marketing, entrepreneurship and small business, international business, IE, management, and other journals, which have hosted special issues in IE or often published IE-related articles (see Table 1 for a full listing of these journals). The search results were additionally compared with two IE article lists provided in the virtual community of global IE researchers ([www.ie-scholars.net](http://www.ie-scholars.net)) to ensure the inclusion of all listed case studies: “Key Articles in the Development of International Entrepreneurship” and “IE Articles 2010-2012 (prepared by Nicole Coviello in October 2013)”.

***[Table 1 near here]***

In accordance with the practice of Jones *et al.* (2011), the searches were not confined to only top-quality business journals. This decision was dictated by the objective of this study and the status of IE studies. It is very likely that some interesting methodological ideas and practices are published in “lower level” journals before they are widely accepted by mainstream outlets. As IE research is still at an emergent stage of development, this inclusion facilitates extensions that improve IE knowledge (Jones *et al.*, 2011). After eliminating

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<sup>2</sup> These five major studies were selected because of two reasons. First, they followed a rigorous methodology as to the performed literature reviews. Second, in line with this paper’s definition, they conceived IE as either innovative, proactive and risk-seeking behavior (Coviello and Jones, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2011; Keupp and Gassmann, 2009) or opportunity identification activities (Mainela *et al.*, 2014; Peiris *et al.*, 2012) in the international context.

possible replications of the aforementioned procedures, 1,015 IE empirical studies were identified. This result is very comprehensive when compared with 714, 323 and 291 entries of Schwens *et al.* (2018), Jones *et al.* (2011) and Peiris *et al.* (2012), respectively, despite the slight differences in the focal periods.

In the second phase of this review, these empirical studies were classified into categories. Following Nakata and Huang (2005), the articles were classified as “quantitative” (60%, 611 entries) if they predominantly relied on large-scale data collection and analysis; “qualitative” (35%, 356), if the examination collected data using methods like case studies, ethnography or in-depth interviews, and analyzed these data using methods like content analysis; and, “mixed-method” (5%, 48), if the study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, and both methods played substantial roles in the study. At this stage, case articles were also identified. During this process, the review encountered the difficulty of deciding what to regard as a case study. Initially the author claims were used as a guide; however, some articles conflated the terms “case” and “example”. Some articles even proved to be practitioner papers or teaching cases, and so, these articles were excluded from the analysis (see Welch *et al.*, 2011). The definition of QCR proposed by Piekkari *et al.* (2009) was taken into consideration because it highlights its role in theory confrontation and has been widely used in IE. Following this approach, 292 qualitative IE case studies were finally identified<sup>3</sup>, which primarily appear in principal journals (67%) within the key disciplines presented in Table 1. The category of “others” covers the IE QCRs in the lower-level journals within these disciplines as well as the ones in other fields such as area studies (n=15), technology & information management (n=6), economics (n=4), innovation (n=4), strategy (n=3), social science (n=2), organization studies (n=2), and human geography (n=1). These studies either touched upon the substantive domain of IE (e.g. study of IE phenomena such as high-tech

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<sup>3</sup> Due to space constraints, the full list of references can be made available upon request.

ventures for innovation) or utilized IE concepts and theories to address relevant research problems (e.g. entrepreneurial opportunity as a lens of studying field-specific issues). For instance, Henns (2012) examined the impact of transnational entrepreneurship on the change of production structures in different geographical locations.

The case method turns out to be the most common research design in the IE qualitative enquiry as QCR accounts for 29% of total IE empirical studies from 1989 to 2017. Coviello and Jones (2004) found that less than a quarter of the 55 articles they reviewed employed qualitative techniques, out of which only five case studies existed. More recently, Keupp and Gassmann (2009) found that there were only 35 qualitative studies out of 149 empirical papers they reviewed, yet their review included only “high-quality” journals. Overall, it appears that the steady growth of QCR publications reflects the increasing attractiveness of QCR to IE researchers as shown in Table 1.

The third phase of this review sought to classify the IE articles previously identified as qualitative case studies. A qualitative content analysis was conducted as it went beyond the enumeration of categories to classify and interpret text, paying attention to the content and author arguments. This approach is characterized by an emergent flexibility as it allowed authors to follow cycles of coding and go through stages of the analysis more than once (Schreier, 2012). It has been substantially used in the aforementioned review studies in the IE field.

The coding of published articles was theory-driven but also flexible and exploratory, allowing key categories and concepts to emerge from the data (see Schreier, 2012). This review commenced with, but then supplemented, the coding frame that was based on insights drawn from the extant methodological literature on QCR. Each article included in the review was content-analyzed to assess the theoretical purpose and research design of QCR as well as whether and how these aspects of QCR were followed throughout the examined article. In this

examination, 21 categories formed the columns of a coding spreadsheet, with a row for each article. Besides the ones shown in Table 2, these categories also included the research topic, research objective, theoretical purpose, philosophical stance along with others. The theoretical purpose was determined according to the guidelines set by the relevant QCR literature (Bonoma, 1985; Welch *et al.*, 2011; Yin, 2014), which are outlined in the previous section. There were certain difficulties in classifying the theoretical purpose of some of the articles. Occasionally this occurred because the theoretical purpose was not stated explicitly or was even misstated. The philosophical stance that refers to the onto-epistemology of the QCR was identified through an overall consideration of the paradigmatic claim of author(s), the theoretical purpose of the paper, the methodological authorities consulted, the sampling logic, the emphasis on context, and the rhetoric of writing (Welch *et al.*, 2011; Welch *et al.*, 2013).

## Findings

Because the ways to view reality and assessment criteria for QCRs under different philosophical orientations tend to vary (Welch and Piekkari, 2017), the findings and evaluations are presented by differentiating positivistic from alternative QCRs. In each cohort, the presentation is guided by the focus of this review in terms of the theoretical purpose of QCR, research design, and quality evaluation.

The disciplinary convention of QCRs (n=284) in IE is found in a positivistic stance, which probably also is a result of the prevalence of positivism in marketing, international business and other business-related disciplines (e.g. Piekkari *et al.*, 2009; Piekkari *et al.*, 2010; Welch *et al.*, 2011). Eight post-positivist studies representing interpretivist, constructionist and critical realist approaches were also identified.

### *IE case studies with positivistic approach*

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3       *Theoretical purpose.* In general, positivistic IE case studies serving exploratory (n=134)  
4  
5 and theory-building (n=66) purposes (as per Yin and Eisenhardt) have occupied a dominant  
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7 position. This finding reflects the relative adolescence of the IE field and the attempt to  
8  
9 improve the understanding of IE phenomena through theory development. Some “descriptive”  
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11 studies (n=12) following the insights of Yin (2014) were also identified.  
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14       “Exploratory” is the most common term mentioned in IE QCRs despite it being used  
15  
16 very loosely, and typically in two forms. One form tends to have more deductive elements  
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18 (e.g. Spence and Crick, 2006) relying on relevant literature to identify possible general  
19  
20 directions and then conducting the case study to explore associated research questions. The  
21  
22 other form seems to be more inductive, using QCR to tentatively gain some insights into the  
23  
24 investigated phenomenon (e.g. Apfelthaler, 2000). An exemplar reason for the employment of  
25  
26 “exploratory” case studies associated with a gap-spotting approach (Sandberg and Alvesson,  
27  
28 2011) is “because there is a lacuna in the literature regarding the activities of international  
29  
30 entrepreneurial firms viewed through the lens of the international market presence aspect”  
31  
32 (Dimitratos *et al.*, 2010, p. 592).  
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35       With regard to the IE theory-building QCRs, Eisenhardt’s (1989) method seemingly is  
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37 widely accepted by an absolute majority of reviewed articles, which could be partially  
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39 manifested by the citations in their methodologies. As Kirkwood and Walton (2010, p. 205)  
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41 noted, “[w]e use Eisenhardt’s (1989) method and process for building theory from cases that  
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43 is ‘highly iterative’ and ‘tightly linked to data’”. It is also interesting that a significant  
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45 majority of theory-building case studies (n=50) ended their analysis processes with  
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47 propositions or conceptual framework, again in line with Eisenhardt’s (1989) theorizing  
48  
49 tradition. Notwithstanding the popularity of the data-grounded approach (e.g. Bruton *et al.*,  
50  
51 2009), the current research found five recent QCRs employing abductive (e.g. Rocha *et al.*,  
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53 2012) and multi-grounded theorizing (e.g. Sigfusson and Harris, 2012) approaches. In both  
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2 approaches, existing theoretical contributions were incorporated into studies either prior to or  
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4 after exploring data signaling iteration between evidence and theory. Although  
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6 theory-building QCRs are logically inductive, this review revealed that most of these studies  
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8 have not justified their stance and presented themselves deductively. One exception refers to  
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10 Schotter and Abdelzaher (2013, p. 83), who noted that "... for presentation purposes only, we  
11  
12 adopted the convention set by the post-positivist research paradigm, to present literature up  
13  
14 front, followed by a description of the methodology followed by the findings". A further  
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16 exploration provided evidence with a completely inductive presentation of theory-building  
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18 case study (Prashantham and Dhanaraj, 2010). In their work, which coherently reflects  
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20 Eisenhardt's recommendations, the methodology was presented following an introduction,  
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22 and then a combination of case and literature analysis led to the development of propositions.  
23  
24 In addition, twelve "descriptive" QCRs have been encountered. Consistent with Yin's  
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26 portrayal of this category, these "descriptive" cases primarily performed illustrations of the IE  
27  
28 process in different contexts rather than elaborated on theoretical concepts (e.g. Bell and  
29  
30 Loane, 2010).  
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35 More interestingly, there were some atypical practices in IE QCRs, including "theory  
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37 testing" (n=29), "theory refinement or extension" (n=33) as well as "explanatory" studies  
38  
39 (n=10). Regarding "theory-testing" IE QCRs, this review made several interesting findings.  
40  
41 First, when addressing its research aim, no article explicitly employed the term "test" rather  
42  
43 than more "neutral" terms such as "investigate", "shed light on" or "understand". Second,  
44  
45 some studies described their research objectives vaguely or broadly, reflecting the difficulty  
46  
47 that authors encountered in discussing how to relate theory to case empirical evidence. Third,  
48  
49 in order to justify their approaches, a majority of these studies claimed that they were  
50  
51 tentative in nature inspired by the positivist tradition that favors statistical generalization. For  
52  
53 instance, Gabriellsson (2005, p. 218) noted that "[t]his result is, however, a preliminary nature  
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and will require further verification”. In addition, the current review did not observe any in-depth discussion that went beyond statistical generalization to embrace analytical inference and contextualized explanation regarding this approach in the reviewed IE QCRs. An example that highlights the importance of theory-testing QCR is provided by Chandra *et al.* (2009). This study initially used qualitative data from eight cases to examine the effect of search activities, networks and entrepreneurial orientation on the processes of international opportunity recognition through testing three preset research propositions, which were confirmed/disconfirmed in light of the case evidence.

This review’s analysis has also identified “theory refinement” and “theory extension” approaches in IE QCRs. These explicate the suitability of QCR for later stages of theory development beyond exploration. This type of case study is employed to challenge, extend and refine theory (e.g. Perks and Hughes, 2008). QCRs with a “theory extension” purpose sought to extend theories or concepts from other fields into studying IE phenomena. Two successful examples refer to Kontinen and Ojala (2011b, p. 135) and Sainio *et al.* (2011, p. 562). The former study articulated that “...we aim to extend existing social capital theories to a new context, namely the internationalization of family SMEs”, while the latter suggested that “[i]n order to increase our understanding of the applicability and usefulness of the business model concept on IE, a case-study approach was chosen”. Apart from the construction of IE theories, the current study’s findings revealed that validated borrowing seems to offer another approach to provide solid basis to further theoretical advancement of the IE field.

QCRs regarding theoretical purposes that were least frequently encountered included “explanatory” research. The lack of “explanatory” QCRs in IE may be attributed to the insufficiently documented explanation-building process. Some authors (e.g. Freeman and Cavusgil, 2007, p. 8) attempted to alleviate this challenge through indicating that “[t]he

method we adopt herein entails a qualitative, primarily explanatory research perspective. However, elements of both exploratory and descriptive research are apparent in the cases because of the holistic nature of the research questions”.

In addition, Figure 1 presents the trend of these atypical theoretical purposes from 1993 to 2017. The variety of atypical theoretical purposes reaches its climax during 2009–2012. Evidently, 79% “theory testing” (23 out of 29), 88% “theory refinement or extension” (29 out of 33), 80% “abductive” (4 out of 5), and 70% “explanatory” (7 out of 10) QCRs have appeared within the last 8.5-year period of this review. These findings suggest an increase in theoretical purpose diversity of IE positivistic QCRs in the past 10 years, illustrating that case scholars within this school of thought gradually decouple “qualitative” and “exploratory” research, and pursue theory refinement, elaboration or testing. Theory elaboration, often viewed as a form of abductive reasoning, utilizes existing theory to examine empirical realities and identify whether theory falls short so that it can be elaborated (Fisher and Aguinis, 2017). The theoretical purpose diversity of QCR in IE may be attributed to the diffusion of an alternative rhetoric within the qualitative positivistic repertoire, which is a part of a wider, ongoing dialogue over the role of theory in academic research (Suddaby, 2014).

***[Figure 1 here]***

Overall, this study’s analysis suggested a substantial lack of clarity in the published positivistic IE cases regarding their theoretical purpose due to four reasons. First, a few articles either mentioned little about theoretical purposes or provided no cues through using neutral terms such as “to investigate” when addressing their research aims. Even more confusing was the fact that some authors have offered generic arguments and not provided the most pertinent justifications for choosing QCRs in response to their theoretical purposes, while discursively and simultaneously presenting several others (e.g. to answer “how” and “why” questions, to deal with complexity, to conceptualize the phenomenon, to provide rich

information and to capture the context).

Second, the theoretical purposes were misstated in some studies, and what these works actually performed did not follow what they claimed previously. For instance, one study reports in its methodology section, “[t]his research adopts a qualitative case study design, deemed appropriate for theory development in international entrepreneurship...” (theory building); while it states when analyzing its findings “...as expected, the data provided support for the base-line Proposition 1...” (theory testing). Third, the review found inconsistencies regarding theoretical purposes in various parts of some articles. A typical example was that of a study that used a positivist language “...to test the effects of entrepreneurship and networking relationship on the internationalization pattern of SMEs...” (a strong cue of theory testing) in its abstract, while eventually it indicated “...constructing a theoretical descriptive framework about the studied phenomenon based on the multi-case (two or more cases) qualitative study” in its methodology. Fourth, a mixture of different philosophical stances was observed in few studies. For example, a study sought to understand and actually investigated “...how managers perceive and construct time in a subjective sense...” (interpretivist stance) and simultaneously it also indicated “...the intention of our study was to build theory...”, which adhered to a deductive pattern matching logic (Eisenhardt’s positivist stance) in its analysis. In short, all these practices decrease the clarity of theoretical purposes of QCRs and may impede, confuse, or even mislead the reader to approach the real objectives of case studies in the IE field.

*Research design.* The content analysis findings for research design are presented in Table 2. This evidence reveals the general approaches adopted by IE positivistic QCRs, specifically those referring to the sampling strategy, unit of analysis, data collection method, method/process of analysis, and presentation of findings.

***[Table 2 here]***

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3 First, as to the sampling strategy, purposeful sampling, namely the selection of  
4 information-rich cases for in-depth study, was more frequently used to describe case selection  
5 (n=94; 33%). Criterion sampling (n=70; 25%) and theoretical sampling (n=50; 18%) were  
6  
7 more commonly used along with other approaches such as convenience sampling,  
8  
9 identification of unique cases, judgmental sampling and representative sampling. As shown in  
10  
11 Figure 2, these atypical practices in terms of sampling strategies have rapidly increased since  
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13 2001, but most frequently appeared in the period 2009–2012. It was interesting to observe two  
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15 polarized trends in terms of sample justification, namely unique cases that emphasized  
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17 contextual richness and convenience sampling that relied on accessibility, availability at a  
18  
19 given time or geographical proximity of investigated cases.  
20  
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23

24 It was also observed that 22 studies did not mention this issue. Purposeful sampling was  
25  
26 mainly “... for the purpose of this research...” (Freeman *et al.*, 2012, p. 94), while criterion  
27  
28 sampling was usually applied to selecting the appropriate study object following its definition,  
29  
30 e.g. born globals (Andersson and Wictor, 2003). In order to respond to the theory  
31  
32 development in IE, literal and theoretical replication logic advocated by Eisenhardt (1989)  
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34 was also followed by some studies. For example, Pettersen and Tobiassen (2012, p. 123)  
35  
36 noted that “we select two similar business cases and one dissimilar to explore similar and  
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38 contrasting results”.  
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41 ***[Figure 2 here]***  
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44 This review found very limited evidence incorporating prior empirical evidence to guide  
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46 case selection. There are a few exceptions including Rasmussen *et al.* (2001) and Gabrielsson  
47  
48 (2005); for example, Rasmussen *et al.*’s (2001) case study followed a survey in order to  
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50 understand in detail identified born global firms. This approach was advantageous since it  
51  
52 uncovered the idiosyncrasies of the investigated cases and allowed for method triangulation  
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54 by incorporating nuances of the pilot study in discussing the case study evidence.  
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Second, as to the unit of analysis, this investigation revealed that firm-level (n=198) and individual-level (n=24) analysis studies dominated IE positivistic QCRs, accounting for 78% of identified studies. This manifests that entrepreneurial firms and entrepreneurs in the international context have attracted the majority of research attention. There are several other studies focusing on state, region, industry, community, cluster, project, subsidiary, or even dual levels of analysis. However, these units of analysis seem to be static in nature. Also, 23 studies did not specify their choices on this issue.

This review has additionally identified several more dynamic units of analysis including the network- (n=13), opportunity- (n=6), and process-level (n=3) analysis in IE positivistic QCRs. As exhibited in Figure 3, nearly 85% of these dynamic units of analysis appeared after 2005, when the concept of IE was reformulated as opportunity identification and exploitation (Oviatt and McDougall, 2005). For instance, in order to explore the network dynamics of international new ventures, Coviello (2006, p. 718) indicated that “the unit of analysis was the network from the perspective of the INV (international new venture)”. In a related vein, Kontinen and Ojala (2011a, p. 498) also noted that “the unit of analysis for this study was the recognition of the opportunity...” to capture the dynamism of opportunity recognition. The process involving many interactions was also adopted as the basic unit of study. Voudouris *et al.* (2011) and Varis *et al.* (2005) chose the learning and partnering process of firms, respectively, as the unit of analysis to provide a holistic view of IE phenomena.

***[Figure 3 here]***

Third, as to data collection methods, sole interviews (n=39; 14%) or their combination (n=162; 57%) with secondary data sources (such as internal reports, media, company websites and archival data) were the most usual methods for collecting qualitative data for positivistic QCRs in IE. This is in line with prior evidence in the other business research fields (e.g. Piekkari *et al.*, 2010). In total, 72 studies (25%) additionally employed other methods in

collecting qualitative data, and most of them (74%; n=53) appeared in the past six years. Only 11 studies did not report anything on this issue.

A further examination revealed the employment of less frequently presented methods including participant observation ( $\times 38$ ), email communication (shown  $\times 11$  times), questionnaires ( $\times 10$ ), and focus group ( $\times 4$ ). A good example with diverse data methods is Chelekis and Mudambi (2010), which investigated the activities of multinational corporations in the direct sales industry regarding micro-entrepreneurship in the Brazilian Amazon. Through an ethnographic case study, one author “spent two months living and working in two upland communities... observing their (entrepreneurs’) sales calls and delivery visits, and talking to them regularly about their work”. Following this, the authors conducted a focus group that “... provided the opportunity to observe the discussion and interaction between participants focused on specific research questions”. Subsequently, the researchers developed a questionnaire from the observation and used a focus group in a small-scale survey supplemented by interviews with multinational corporation managers (Chelekis and Mudambi, 2010, p. 416). In their study, the authors employed multiple data collection methods that were tightly synthesized and complemented to offer in-depth and contextually rich information for the purpose of theory development.

Fourth, as to the methods/processes of analysis, this review suggests that within and across-case (n=76; 27%) and pattern matching (n=72; 25%) analysis represented the related strategies claimed by over half of IE QCRs. Less frequent methods included critical event analysis (n=15; 5%) and abductive or inductive and deductive approach (n=7; 2%). A majority (82%; n=18) appeared in the last six years of the review. It is noteworthy that 70 (25%) studies did not report their methods or process of analysis. In the remaining 44 positivistic QCRs, the employment of coding, content or thematic analysis was intensively mentioned without detailed descriptions.

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3 It is expected that the analysis methods, such as within and across-case and pattern  
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5 matching analysis, were widely employed, confirming the dominance of positivist case  
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7 studies in IE. These approaches were obviously important and well-established to facilitate  
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9 theorizing (Eisenhardt, 1989). We encountered a few studies following abductive reasoning  
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11 (e.g. Rocha *et al.*, 2012) and combining deductive and inductive procedures, which were  
12  
13 suitable for theory refinement, as discussed earlier. Only fifteen studies claimed that they used  
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15 the critical incident technique. Such a technique was discussed as a "...qualitative interview  
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17 procedure that facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents,  
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19 processes or issues) identified by respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in  
20  
21 terms of perceived effects" (Chell, 1998, p. 56). It is favored to "...investigate causality as it  
22  
23 actually happens in a particular setting" (Evers *et al.*, 2012, p. 53). Turcan's (2012) work is a  
24  
25 good example with a detailed illustration of how the critical incident technique was conducted.  
26  
27 In comparison to conventional manual analysis, the current review identified 39 QCR studies  
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29 that employed several software packages to facilitate qualitative data analysis, involving  
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31 NVIVO (e.g. Makhmadshoev *et al.*, 2015), NUDIST (e.g. Voudouris *et al.*, 2011), ATLAS  
32  
33 (e.g. Mahdjour and Eischer, 2014), NETDRAW (e.g. Henn, 2012), Leximancer (e.g.  
34  
35 Middleton *et al.*, 2011), and MAXQDA (e.g. Thai and Chong, 2013).  
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39 Fifth, as to the presentation of findings, this was organized by main themes (n=163). This  
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41 is prevalent in IE QCRs, consistent with a considerable number of studies with exploratory or  
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43 theory-building purposes in this field. In total, 28 and 51 QCRs presented their findings by  
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45 proposition testing and advancement of propositions or frameworks (refinement processes of  
46  
47 propositions or frameworks), respectively. Diachronic analysis, namely the study of change in  
48  
49 a phenomenon over time, was only chosen by seven studies for the presentation of their  
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51 findings, and these all appeared after 2009 with one exception.  
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54 The novel presentation approach of diachronic analysis was used to offer the evolution  
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process of IE phenomena and provide historical context, which was usually followed by a synchronic analysis at one point of time. These examinations were mainly in the form of historical event analysis as the progressive accumulation of these events is critical in understanding path dependency. Behaviors or actions that occur during and immediately following these historical events tend to be significant (e.g. Nasra and Dacin, 2010).

*Evaluative criteria and quality assessment of IE positivistic QCRs.* To facilitate the logic of replication and generalization, evaluative criteria for positivist QCRs pose a request for robustness. A vigorous positivistic QCR demonstrates itself in the concern of construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability (Gibbert *et al.*, 2008). Following the insights of Yin (2014), this review has examined a few key aspects of methodological vigor in terms of the number of cases, methods of verification, comparison with existing literature, and overall transparency.

In relation to positivist QCRs, a multiple-case design is preferred to a single-case approach as emergent patterns will be confirmed or tested by multiple cases and eventually increase external validity (Welch and Piekkari, 2017). In this review, out of 284 IE QCRs, 147 featured between four and ten cases. A typical justification for the selection of multiple cases is that “the selection of seven SMEs falls within Eisenhardt’s (1989) suggestion for the appropriate number of cases, which is between four and ten, because it is enough for analytical generalization without creating an unwieldy volume of data” (Galkina and Chetty, 2015, p. 657).

In addition, it was observed that the majority of IE positivistic QCRs (n=261) claimed to use one or more methods to verify their findings. Ranked in order of the presented frequency, these were multiple sources of evidence (× 200), multiple informants (× 125), collection and re-collection (× 65), multiple interviewers and analysts (× 56), and feedback from interviewees on case transcripts or findings (× 54). From a positivist view, all these methods



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3 were helpful in reducing certain subjective biases from interviewers or interviewees, through  
4  
5 which researchers could enhance the reliability and construct validity of their QCR findings.  
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7 A typical example performing diverse methods of verification is Kalinic *et al.* (2014), which  
8  
9 focused on rapid internationalization of traditional small firms. To achieve triangulation, they  
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11 collected data from three different sources including interviews, archival data and  
12  
13 observations. To control interviewee bias in each enterprise, they interviewed the entrepreneur  
14  
15 and at least one other manager who was most involved in the internationalization process. To  
16  
17 reduce observer bias, all interviews were conducted by two investigators. Further, to clarify  
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19 conflicting results and conduct verification, at least one informant from each firm was  
20  
21 contacted for a follow-up interview.  
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25 This review also examined whether IE QCRs compared their findings against extant  
26  
27 literature as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989, p. 545) because “tying the emergent theory to  
28  
29 existing literature enhances the internal validity, generalizability, and theoretical level of the  
30  
31 theory building from case study research”. The current review identified that a majority of IE  
32  
33 QCRs (n=220) followed this practice and made such comparisons or linked their findings  
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35 with literature. The approach further corroborated the internal validity of these studies.  
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39 Research transparency captures an additional dimension of research quality (Gibbert *et*  
40  
41 *al.*, 2008), which indicates how well research methods and analysis are reported. Overall, the  
42  
43 current analysis suggests that the methodological transparency in positivistic IE QCRs was  
44  
45 not satisfactory. A majority of reviewed positivistic QCRs cannot be considered to be well  
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47 presented and reported regarding their research methods and analysis. This finding is similar  
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49 with Bluhm *et al.*’s (2011) qualitative review in management.

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51 Out of 284 positivistic IE articles examined in the present study, only 84 (29%)  
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53 contained sufficient information and complete descriptions of research design, data coding  
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55 and analysis techniques as well as criteria used to ensure the quality of QCR evidence. This  
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suggests the overall vagueness in the methodological reporting of IE positivist QCRs. It is noteworthy that nearly half (n=38; 45%) of the studies with good methodological reporting practices emerged within the past five years. It shows that an increased number of IE qualitative case researchers have started acting on this critical methodological issue.

#### *IE case studies with alternative paradigmatic approaches*

This review identified only eight alternative QCRs that represent the stances of interpretivism (n=1), social constructionism (n=2) and critical realism (n=5), respectively. There are two possible reasons accountable for the near absence of case studies linked to other philosophical stances. First, when compared with qualitative positivism, alternative paradigmatic approaches are more recent additions to the methodological literature (Welch *et al.*, 2011). Second, the publishing of QCR based on other onto-epistemologies tends to be difficult given the prevalence of concepts regarding decontextualization of theorizing and generalization emphasized by positivistic case study advocates.

*Theoretical purpose.* Embracing the stance of interpretivism, Carrier (1999, p. 33) articulated its research purpose as "...to reveal idiosyncratic perceptions of the owner-managers rather than to obtain confirmation or denial of a set of training needs previously identified by researchers in the field". It served the theoretical purpose of "exploratory" to understand the needs of international training and development perceived by Canadian small business owner-managers. Slightly different from the position of interpretivist QCR, social constructionist IE QCRs "...emphasize the social self but focus on the interactive (rather than cognitive) aspects of social or international being and becoming" (Fletcher, 2004, p. 296). With the theoretical purpose of "exploratory", both IE QCRs under this paradigm (Fletcher, 2004; Lehto, 2015) examine opportunity construction through international buyer-seller interactions and joint cross-border co-ordinations between entrepreneurs and external

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2  
3 players, respectively. “Exploration” is not associated with the first steps of a study leading to  
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5 hypotheses-testing research, instead it is “reclaimed and reinterpreted as a means of gaining  
6  
7 in-depth understanding of local, emic meanings and remaining open to alternative  
8  
9 perspectives” (Welch *et al.*, 2013, p. 256).  
10

11 In addition, four out of five critical realist QCRs (e.g. Andersen & Rask, 2014) took  
12  
13 advantage of the “explanatory” potential of QCRs by developing contextualized explanations  
14  
15 of investigated phenomena. Interestingly, there was one realist QCR (Oxtorp, 2014) with the  
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17 aim of theory building, which developed propositions for the implications of specific contexts  
18  
19 such as organizational processes, rules and structures to dynamic managerial capability.  
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22 *Research design.* A majority (n=5) of alternative IE QCRs adopted purposeful sampling.  
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24 This finding is similar to that of their positivistic counterparts. Two critical realist case studies  
25  
26 employed convenience sampling and one study did not specify its sampling strategy. The  
27  
28 employment of convenience sampling for critical realists may be attributed to the difficulty of  
29  
30 accessing data over time since longitudinal design is essential to understand the contextual  
31  
32 dynamics or complexity. For instance, through an industrial PhD project, Oxtorp (2014, p.  
33  
34 402) approached “the opportunity to spend much of her time at the firm’s premises, studying  
35  
36 the organization, taking part in meetings, talking to employees and the management, etc.”.  
37  
38 With regard to the unit of analysis, all three interpretivist/constructionist cases adopted  
39  
40 individual-level analysis, which fits their paradigmatic focus. Their critical realist  
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42 counterparts are diverse on this aspect, which include two firm-level studies, one  
43  
44 opportunity-level study, one process-level study, and one that did not specify its unit of  
45  
46 analysis. For instance, taking more dynamic “opportunity” as their unit of analysis, Mainela  
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48 and Puhakka (2011, p. 20) suggested that “[a]ccording to our study, essential for  
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50 understanding the international new venture emergence process is setting the opportunity in  
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52 the focus”.  
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3 It is found that all IE-interpretive QCRs, including interpretivist and constructionist  
4 stances, used face-to face interviews as the sole method for data collection, while critical  
5 realist QCRs employed at least two means to collect data including email communication and  
6 observation. To some extent, this evidence echoes their ontological and epistemological  
7 differences concerning reality. IE-interpretive QCRs tend to appreciate the strength of  
8 in-depth interviews to understand idiosyncratic perceptions of informants and related  
9 interactions in international opportunity enactment.  
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18 Apart from one study without relevant information of analysis process, this research  
19 found that narrative (n=4) and content (n=3) analysis represented the main analysis strategies  
20 for interpretative and critical realist QCRs, respectively. In a constructionist case study, Lehto  
21 (2015) argued that narratives in the forms of story/experience-telling enacted holistic  
22 descriptions of relevant events, actors and the context, and the meaning attached to the  
23 associations between them was not fixed but socially constructed. In comparison, content  
24 analysis employed by critical realists was primarily used to reduce and interpret data (e.g.  
25 Kontinen and Ojala, 2012). The presentation of QCR findings was organized by main themes  
26 (n=6) and diachronic analysis (n=2). The employment of diachronic analysis by two critical  
27 realist case studies mainly facilitated the understanding of the chronology of the events (e.g.  
28 Mainela *et al.*, 2011).  
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42 *Evaluative criteria and quality assessment of IE alternative QCRs.* Different knowledge  
43 claims stemming from varied paradigmatic beliefs require heterogenous evaluative criteria  
44 (Johnson *et al.*, 2006; Welch and Piekkari, 2017). However, QCR authors have not operated  
45 consistently within a particular philosophical stance. In relation to  
46 interpretivist/constructionist QCR, no study specified the researchers' personal involvement  
47 or co-production of findings with participants as a source of interpretive insight; no study  
48 discussed reflexivity to consider the role of investigators' identity on the research; and, no  
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study reported the researchers' and participants' different accounts that allowed multiple voices to speak (e.g. Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Nevertheless, two out of three studies used thick descriptions to explore focal issues in the contexts and to make sense of "what is told about focal actors, events, situations and emotions" (Lehto, 2015, p. 285).

This review also explored research quality criteria of IE QCR that endorsed critical realism. First, it was discovered that the selection of cases was driven by both theoretical considerations and contexts in IE QCRs. As well as a discussion of theoretical frameworks or components that guide case selection, all realist QCRs in this review explicitly addressed the importance of context. For instance, Kontinen and Ojala (2012, p. 502) acknowledged that "...in an entrepreneurial process, there are several components interacting simultaneously, and the phenomenon is connected to the organizational context". To understand dynamic contexts sufficiently, four out of five studies adopted a longitudinal design. Second, this research found that these QCRs intentionally combined theoretical frameworks with contextual elements to provide idiosyncratic explanations to focal generative mechanisms. A typical example is Mainela *et al.* (2011), whose study identified a repertoire of behaviors embedded in various networks of the INV, which drew from literature and generated three types of processes in terms of internationalization-, opportunity- and technology-centered processes. Third, all the IE-realist QCRs employed multiple sources of evidence that included interviews and additional evidence to achieve triangulation. Importantly, four out of five studies received the interpretation or comments of informants on their findings. However, only one critical realist QCR (Andersen and Rask, 2014, p. 370) claimed the employment of retroduction logic that underpinned their analysis as a process "to trace specific conditions that either lead or have led to a given event". Surprisingly, there was no IE QCR that involved empirical corroboration to demonstrate the workability and superiority of proposed generative mechanism (Wynn and Williams, 2012). Collectively, the analyses above suggest that quality

criteria are contingent on philosophical assumptions rendering the notion of “good” QCR polysemous. In practice, case scholars have not fully exploited the toolkit of contingent criteriology (Johnson *et al.*, 2006), which may sensitize them to particular quality challenges that their research should address. The awareness that may result from such reviews can help case authors to match their philosophical assumptions to particular forms of inquiry and evaluation.

## Conclusions

IE as a research field deals with actors, phenomena and behaviors that are dynamic, processual and complex in nature (Reuber *et al.*, 2018). Following Platt’s view (1996) that methodologies cannot be understood in a vacuum, this study sought to assess the QCR methodology in the IE field, which is based on the evidence collected from 292 papers published between 1989 and mid-2017. This systematic review reveals that the qualitative positivistic case study with conventional practices constitutes the disciplinary norm in this area, although there is still great room for improvement in their paradigmatic consistency and methodological rigor. An increasing number of atypical practices were observed within the positivistic QCR cohort since 2005, which may respond to the refocusing of the IE research toward opportunity (Oviatt and McDougall, 2005) and the subsequent extension of its research area boundaries. A scant number of alterative QCRs that depart from positivistic assumptions suggest their early stage of development. They also signal an unexpected divergence between practice and methodological writings manifested in the unwillingness of scholars to give up the disciplinary convention and/or ensure consistency in their research designs.

The study makes three important contributions to IE research (see Whetten, 1989). First, it is only one of two available reviews (Coviello and Jones, 2004 being the other one) that

examines methodological advancements in the IE field. Not only that but also it serves as the first attempt to approach them via an angle of philosophical orientation. Apart from its comparative comprehensiveness, for the first time in the area of IE this review specializes in assessing QCR method that achieves good methodological fit with the nascent stage of the field (Edmondson and McManus, 2007; Melén Hånell *et al.*, 2013). Through an examination of the paradigmatic stances and research practices, this review contributes to the state of the art understanding of QCRs, facilitation of quality knowledge creation, and identification of possible directions for further advancement of QCRs in the IE.

Second, this review contributes to the improvement of QCR quality in IE in a timely period when discussions about the future of the field are surging forward (Terjesen *et al.*, 2016; Verbeke and Ciravegna, 2018). According to this study's analysis, IE QCRs that adopt positivistic orientation should pay special attention to articulation of the theoretical purpose, promotion of consistent and robust research design and operationalization, and enhancement of overall transparency. This solution could respond to the long-standing critiques related to the methodological rigor, contingent criteriology and standards of qualitative research (Harley and Faems, 2017). It is recommended that IE QCRs that adopt alternative paradigmatic assumptions consider research quality through contingent criteriology (Johnson *et al.*, 2006) and transparency (Cuervo-Cazurra *et al.*, 2016), which highlight longitudinal design, reflexivity, and an inclusion of etic and emic perspectives. Given the contextual nature of IE actors, behaviors, opportunities and processes (Cornelissen, 2017; Reuber *et al.*, 2017), an inclusion of interpretivism and critical realism is further important.

Third, the present study contributes to the identification of the variety and breadth of research practices in the dominant positivistic QCRs. As well as the prevalent practices, it was noted that the employment of atypical practices by positivistic QCRs from theoretical purposes to the presentation of findings has increased during the past ten years. These atypical

practices are either those that are well documented but seldom used (e.g. theory-testing purpose) or the improvement of conventional practices (an involvement of additional data source beyond interview and secondary data). A careful selection of these atypical practices aligned with the philosophical stance could help address the complexity (e.g. duality of unit of analysis) and dynamism (e.g. process as unit of analysis) of IE phenomena and broaden the IE research horizon. Given the predominance of positivistic QCR, the incorporation into the IE study of such atypical positivistic practices to a greater extent would be a pragmatic way forward to advance the field methodologically and theoretically.

Overall, IE scholars are encouraged to consider their particular philosophical position in undertaking QCRs. Despite the value of the positivistic QCR, researchers should not ignore the potential of alternative paradigmatic traditions. To avoid over-institutionalization of positivistic conventions in research, this review makes a plea for increased pluralism in case study methodology to provide a fuller account of IE phenomena and increase legitimacy of the field (see Piekkari and Welch, 2011). This research further posits that with greater positivistic consistency and adoption of alternative non-positivistic approaches, editors and gatekeepers of high-quality journals may be able to gradually welcome and accept QCR to a higher extent, which would in turn add to the legitimacy of the IE field.

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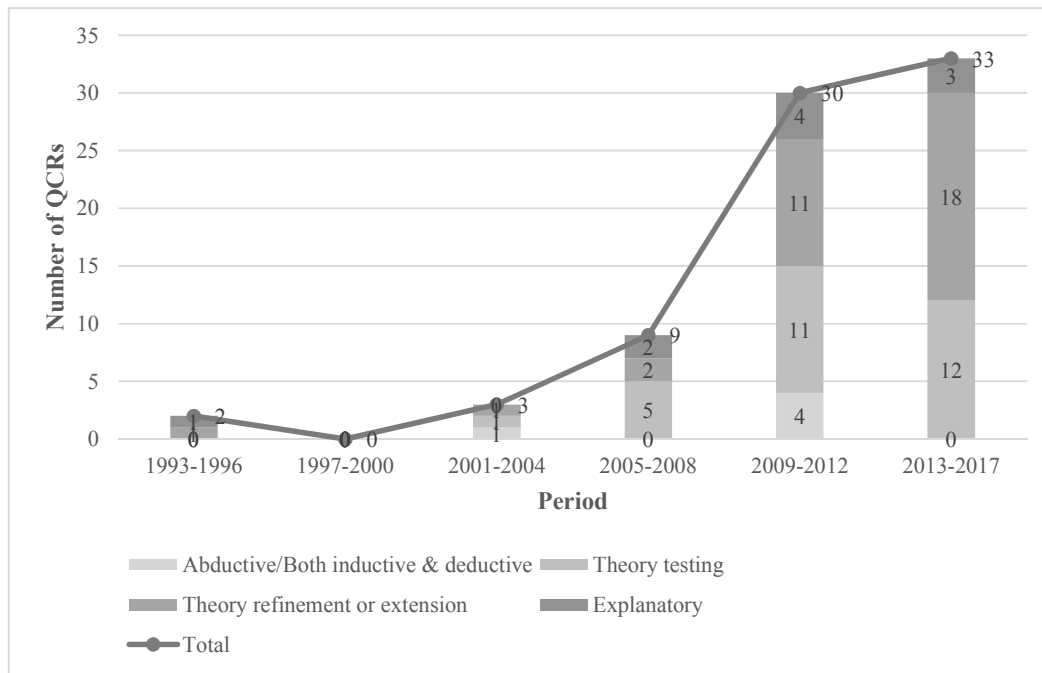


Figure 1: Atypical Theoretical Purposes of Positivistic IE QCRs between 1993-2017

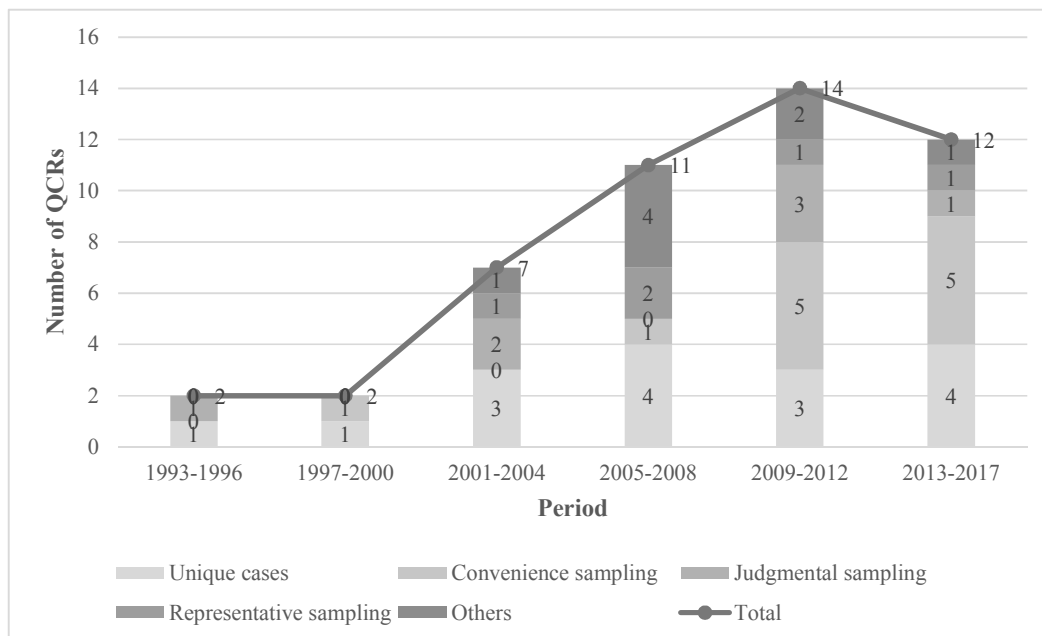


Figure 2: Atypical Sampling Strategies of Positivistic IE QCRs between 1993-2017

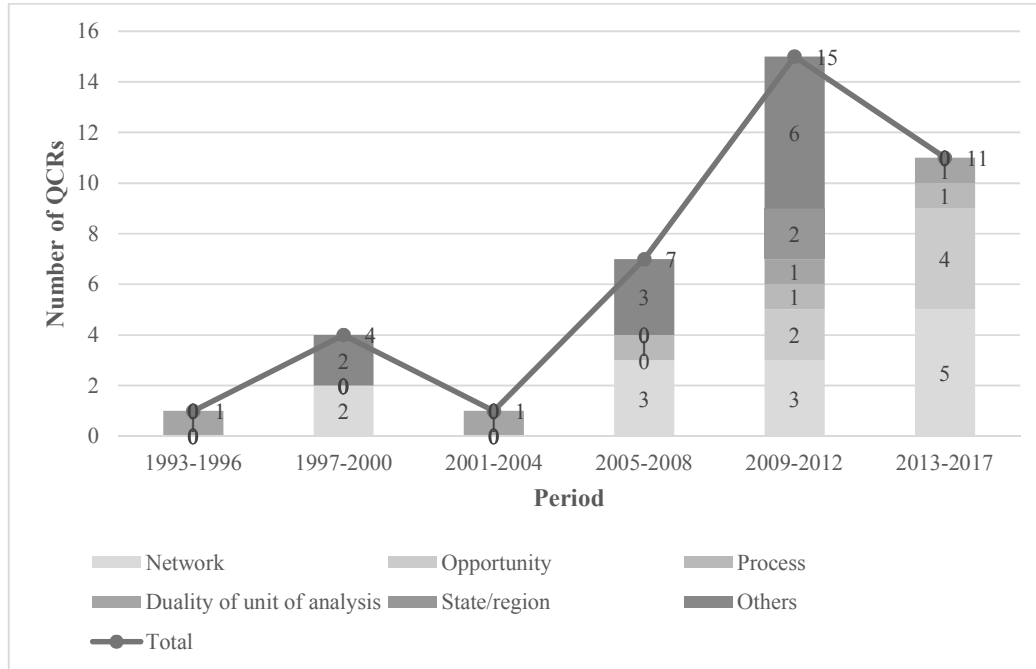


Figure 3: Atypical Units of Analysis of Positivistic IE QCRs between 1993-2017

**Table 1: International Entrepreneurship (IE) Qualitative Case Research Articles by Journal Source and Year**

7	Entrepreneurship								International Business					Marketing					Management				Others	
Period	JBV	ETP	SEJ	SBE	ISBJ	JSBM	ERD	JIEN	JIBS	JWB	IBR	MIR	JIM	JOIM	IMM	IMR	JMM	EJM	AMJ	JMS	LRP	EMJ		Total
1989-1990																								
1991-1992																								
1993-1994	2																							2
1995-1996	1	1																						2
1997-1998					2						1	1		1									1	6
1999-2000				1		2					1			3									1	8
2001-2002	2			1		1						1	1										2	8
2003-2004	2			1	2		1	5				1		1					1			1	6	21
2005-2006								8	1		2	1		1		2							5	20
2007-2008							1	3		5	4			3	1						1	1	5	24
2009-2010		1	1					6	1		1		2		1	4	1			1	1	1	13	34
2011-2012		1			1	1	2	10		1	8	1		3	1	4			1				28	62
2013-2014					1		2	10		2	6	4	1		3	3							13	45
2015-2016					1	2		15		3	4	2				1		1					20	49
2017(till 30/06/17)								2			4		1			1							3	11
Total	7	3	1	3	7	6	6	59	2	11	31	11	5	12	6	15	1	1	1	2	2	3	97	292
% of all articles	2.4	1.0	0.3	1.0	2.4	2.1	2.1	20.2	0.7	3.8	10.6	3.8	1.7	4.1	2.1	5.1	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.7	0.7	1.0	33.2	100

**Note:** JBV= Journal of Business Venturing; ETP= Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice; SEJ= Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal; SBE= Small Business Economics; ISBJ= International Small Business Journal; JSBM= Journal of Small Business Management; ERD= Entrepreneurship and Regional Development; JIEN= Journal of International Entrepreneurship; JIBS= Journal of International Business Studies; JWB= Journal of World Business; IBR= International Business Review; MIR= Management International Review; JIM= Journal of International Management; JOIM= Journal of International Marketing; IMM= Industrial Marketing Management; IMR= International Marketing Review; JMM= Journal of Marketing Management; EJMS= European Journal of Marketing; AMJ= Academy of Management Journal; JMS= Journal of Management Studies; LRP= Long Range Planning; EMJ= European Management Journal.

**Table 2: Content Analysis Evidence of QCR Design in IE**

Primary sampling strategy	No. of papers	Unit of analysis	No. of papers	Data collection method	No. of papers
Purposeful sampling	99 (5)	Firm level	200 (2)	Interview only	42 (3)
Criterion sampling	70	Individual level	27 (3)	Interview & secondary data sources (e.g. internal documents, archives, websites, & media et al.)	164 (2)
Theoretical sampling	50	Network	13	Involved additionally other sources	75 (3)
Unique cases	16	Opportunity	7 (1)	Do not specify	11
Convenience sampling	14 (2)	Process	4 (1)		
Judgmental sampling	7	Duality of unit of analysis	4		
Representative sampling	5	State/region	2		
others	8	Others	11		
Do not specify	23 (1)	Do not specify	24 (1)		
<b>Total</b>	<b>292</b>		<b>292</b>		<b>292</b>
Method/process of analysis	No. of papers	Presentation of findings	No. of papers	Methods of verification	Frequency
(1) <i>Primary method/process of analysis</i>		Main theme analysis	169 (6)	Multiple sources of evidence	205 (5)
Within/cross-case analysis	76	Proposition Testing	28	Multiple informants	130 (5)
Pattern matching	72	Analysis advancing propositions or framework	51	Multiple interviewers & analysts	57 (1)
Critical incident analysis	15	Diachronic Analysis	9 (2)	Collect & re-collect	66 (1)
Abductive/both inductive & deductive approach	7	Do not specify	35	Interviewees' feedbacks	57 (3)
Others	51 (7)			Do not specify	30
Do not specify	71 (1)				
<b>Total</b>	<b>292</b>		<b>292</b>		
(2) <i>Analysis facilitated by software</i>	39				

Note: descriptive statistics for alternative QCRs in brackets